

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## ***The Child Savage, 1890-2010: From Comics to Games* edited by Elizabeth Wesseling (Ashgate, 2016)**

*The Child Savage, 1890-2010* – Ashgate's most recent addition to their 'Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present' series – proceeds from a lack in existing intermedial scholarship regarding the child-savage trope in twentieth-century forms of narrative fiction.

Editor Elizabeth Wesseling succinctly lays out the volume's conceptual framework in her introductory chapter, proceeding from the claim that the child-savage is a root metaphor, and thus 'a foundational conceptual schema from which other metaphors derive' (5). Additionally, it is made explicit that this volume is *not* a study in media history, but rather cultural history. Although she acknowledges the trope's longevity, Wesseling directs attention to four discursive contexts in which the child savage proved integral: to the Enlightenment project, as a being outside the control of language and thus an object of philosophical study; to concepts of modern governance, in which the child savage represented a state of nature against which political and ethical bearings could be postulated; to the Romantics, particularly in their aesthetic considerations; and to nineteenth-century evolutionary science, during which the recapitulationist theories were formed and propagated. This final context is perhaps the concept most often referred to across the volume's essays, and is integral to a better understanding of the paternalistic treatment of colonised subjects by colonialists. That said, it is the constant return to the contradictory construction of the child that is perhaps the collection's most engaging line of thought.

The contributors' 13 essays are divided into three sections: The Child-Savage in (Neo-) Colonial Discourse, Domestic Savages, and Postcolonial Playgrounds. This form of organisation not only allows for an examination across media forms of the twentieth century, but also reveals how, in Wesseling's words, the child-savage trope 'is central to the contradictory meanings that inhabit the construction of "the child" in general' (15). Summarising all 13 essays so as to fit the size of a review would not do them justice, so I will proceed with a discussion of four essays spread throughout the volume, believing them to reveal the wide range of media discussed by Wesseling and her contributors.

Ruth Murphy's chapter, featuring a discussion of Rudyard Kipling *Just So Stories*, pays close attention to the aforementioned theory of the 'recapitulated' child, which posited that the individual development of a child reflected the progress of the human race from savage animal to modern man. Focussing on three stories that feature the character Taffy, Murphy brilliantly argues that Kipling's formation of the child undermines the progressive ideology foundational to colonial expansion, and further proceeds to lay bare the complex interplay between children's literature and the evolutionary theory that informs it, as well as drawing attention to the presence of Romantic conceptions of the child-savage.

Joshua Garrison's essay concerning the (ab)use of the child-savage trope in American exploitation cinema is equally fascinating: tracing the diminishing acceptance of G. Hall Stanley's text *Adolescence* in the 1920s, and the adoption of his writings by the American film industry of the 1930s. Drawing on films such as *Reefer Madness*, *Marihuana*, and *Sex Madness*,

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Garrison reveals manipulative structuring of youth as the social group that is simultaneously savage and at risk of said savagery. Although Garrison's contribution focuses almost exclusively on American cinema and its repercussions for the United States, he nonetheless emphasises a cinematic trope that has persisted into the twenty-first century.

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer sheds light on the impact of the negritude movement on avant-garde children's literature, focussing on the work of Blaise Cendrars, Franz Hellens, Arna Botemps and Langston Hughes. Outlining the origin of the movement and its artistic and political dimensions, Kümmerling-Meibauer advances the argument that Cendrars, Hellens, and Botemps and Hughes employ various methods – such as the deployment of multilingual characters, and the juxtaposition of Romantic and Surrealist ideals – to subvert the Western gaze's infantilising of African art.

Jonathan Bignell critically examines the Action Man children's toy and its relation to concepts of masculinity, specifically those produced from the 1960s to the 1990s. Central to Bignell's argument is the claim that children's toys are bound to 'scripts' of how they must be played with, and ultimately the narrative construction that informs what being a child constitutes. In conjunction, the chapter features a discussion of the rational, enjoyable design of war games, and the placement of the male child within this construction. Bignell eschews a discussion of 'kinds of play' in favour of exploring the discursive struggle surrounding Action Man toys, and engages particularly well with the gendered body of the figurine. In his concluding section, Bignell claims that the cultural formation of war toys 'is not crudely to inculcate national and cultural stereotypes, but to naturalize the concept of war as both natural and eternal' (200).

Proceeding from a literary background, I found the related chapters to be enlightening. That should not deter readers from other disciplines, however, as the text's study also draws upon comic strips, film, school discourse, and radio dramas, among other forms of media. Wesseling and her collaborators succeed, not only in presenting an insightful exploration of the child-savage trope in media, but in contributing to the field of cultural history with an informative and enthralling collection.

**Keenan Collett**